Burroughs

One Luck.

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husky tremor in his voice. "Let him alone, I tell thee. He might leave us in peace now. He has driven us from hearth and home." Then, with indignant energy, "He shall not touch thee, child. By the heavens, he shall not."

Maurice smiled, and with the same sense of serene benignity, wholly unlover-like, clasped her in his arms.

A wild look flashed in the father's eyes; a hoarse groan broke from his chest. Then, with a swift rekindling of energy, he darted forward, and his broad hands fell with a tiger-like grip on Maurice's shoulders. But hark! The voices of the skies and the mountains echo the groan. The air, surcharged with terror, whirls in wild eddies, then holds its breath and trembles. All eyes are turned toward the glacier. The huge white ridge, gleaming here and there through a cloud of smoke, is pushing down over the mountain-side, a black bulwark of earth rising totteringly before it, and a chaos of bowlders and blocks of ice following, with dull crunching and grinding noises, in its train. The barns and the store-house of the Ormgrass farm are seen slowly climbing the moving earth-wall, then follows the mansion—rising—rising—and with a tremendous, deafening crash the whole huge avalanche sweeps downward into the fjord. The water is lashed into foam; an enormous wave bearing on its crest the shattered wrecks of human homes, rolls onward; the good ship *Queen Anne* is tossed skyward, her cable snaps and springs upward against the mast-head, shrieks of terror fill the air, and the sea flings its strong, foam-wreathed arms against the further shore.

A dead silence follows. The smoke scatters, breaks into drifting fragments, showing the black, naked mountain-side.

The next morning, as the first glimmerings of the dawn pierced the cloud-veil in the east, the brig *Queen Anne* shot before a steady breeze out toward the western ocean. In the prow stood Maurice Fern, in a happy reverie; on a coil of rope at his feet sat Tharald Ormgrass, staring vacantly before him. His face was cold and hard; it had scarcely stirred from its reckless apathy since the hour of the calamity. Then there was a patter of light footsteps on the deck, and Elsie, still with something of the child-like wonder of sleep in her eyes, emerged from behind the broad white sail.

Tharald saw her and the hardness died out of his face. He strove to speak once —twice, but could not.

"God pity me," he broke out, with an emotion deeper than his words suggested. "I was wrong. I had no faith in you. She has. Take her, that the old wrong may at last be righted."

And there, under God's free sky, their hands were joined together, and the father whispered a blessing.

ONE DUCK.

A POTOMAC SKETCH.

WHILE on a visit to Washington in January, 1878, I went on an expedition down the Potomac with a couple of friends, Peck and Eldridge, to shoot ducks. We left on the morning boat that makes daily trips to and from Mount Vernon. The weather was chilly and the sky threatening. I have seldom seen such clouds as those fail to bring rain. They were boat-shaped, with well defined keels, but they turned out to be only the fleet of Æolus, for they gradually dispersed or faded out, and before noon the sun was shining.

We saw numerous flocks of ducks on the passage down, and saw a gun (the man was concealed) shoot some from a "blind" near Fort Washington. Opposite Mount Vernon, on the flats, there was a large "bed" of ducks. I thought the word a good one to describe a long strip of water thickly planted with them. One of my friends was a member of the Washington and Mount Vernon Ducking Club, which has its camp and fixtures just below the Mount Vernon landing; he was an old ducker. For my part, I had never killed a duck—except with an ax—nor have I yet.

We made our way along the beach from the landing over piles of drift-wood and soon reached the quarters, a substantial building, fitted up with a stove, bunks, chairs, a table, culinary utensils, crockery,

etc., with one corner piled full of decoys. There were boats to row in and boxes to shoot from, and I felt sure we should have a pleasant time, whether we got any ducks or not. The weather improved hourly, till in the afternoon a well-defined installment of the Indian summer that had been delayed somewhere settled down upon the scene; this lasted during our stay of two days. The river was placid, even glassy, the air richly and deeply toned with haze, and the sun that of the mellowest October. "The fairer the weather, the fewer the ducks," said Eldridge. "But this is better than ducks," I thought, and prayed that it might last.

Then there was something pleasing to the fancy in being so near to Mount Vernon. It formed a sort of rich, historic background to our flitting and trivial experiences. Just where the eye of the great Captain would perhaps first strike the water as he came out in the morning to take a turn up and down his long piazza, the Club had formerly had a "blind," but the ice of a few weeks before our visit had carried it away. A little lower down, and in full view from his bedroom window, was the place where the shooting from the boxes was usually done.

The duck is an early bird, and not much given to wandering about in the afternoon; hence it was thought not worth while to put out the decoys till the next morning. We would spend the afternoon roaming inland in quest of quail, or rabbits, or turkeys (for a brood of the last were known to lurk about the woods back there). It was a delightful afternoon's tramp through oak woods, pine barrens, and half-wild fields. We flushed several quail that the dog should have pointed, and put a rabbit to rout by a well directed broadside, but brought no game to camp. We kicked about an old bushy clearing, where Eldridge and Colonel Morehouse had shot a wild turkey Thanksgiving Day, but the turkey could not be started again. One shooting had sufficed for it. We crossed or penetrated extensive pine woods that had once (perhaps in Washington's time) been cultivated fields; the mark of the plow was still clearly visible. The land had been thrown into ridges, after the manner of English fields, eight or ten feet wide. The pines were scrubby,—what are known as the loblolly pines,—and from ten to twelve inches through at the butt. In a low bottom among some red cedars, I saw robins and several hermit thrushes, besides the yellow-rumped warbler.

That night, as the sun went down on the one hand, the full moon rose up on the other; or, as Peck said, the moon showed the sun to bed. The river, too, was presently brimming with the flood tide. It was so still one could have carried a lighted candle from shore to shore. In a little skiff, we floated and paddled up under the shadow of Mount Vernon and into the mouth of a large creek that flanks it on the left. In the profound hush of things, every sound on either shore was distinctly heard. A large bed of ducks were feeding over on the Maryland side, a mile or more away, and the noise of so many bills in the water sounded deceptively near. Silently we paddled in that direction. When about half a mile from them, all sound of feeding suddenly ceased; then, after a time, as we kept on, there was a great clamor of wings, and the whole bed appeared to take flight. We paused and listened, and presently heard them take to the water again, far below and beyond us.

We loaded a boat with the decoys that night, and in the morning, on the first sign of day, towed a box out in position, and anchored it and disposed the decoys about it. Two hundred painted wooden ducks, each anchored by a small weight that was attached by a cord to the breast, bowed and sidled and rode the water, and did everything but feed, in a bed many yards long. The shooting-box is a kind of coffin, in which the gunner is interred amid the decoys,—buried below the surface of the water, and invisible, except from a point above him. The box has broad canvas wings, that unfold and spread out upon the surface of the water, four or five feet each way. These steady it, and keep the ripples from running in when there is a breeze. Iron decoys sit upon these wings and upon the edge of the box and sink it to the required level, so that when everything is completed and the gunner is in position, from a distance or from the shore one sees only a large bed of ducks, with the line a little more pronounced in the center, where the sportsman lies entombed, to be quickly resurrected when the game appears. He lies there stark and stiff upon his back, like a marble effigy upon a tomb, his gun by his side, with barely room to straighten himself in, and nothing to look at but the sky above him. His companions on shore keep a lookout, and, when ducks are seen on the wing, cry out: "Mark,

coming up," or, "Mark, coming down," or "Mark, coming in," as the case may be. If they decoy, he presently hears the whistle of their wings, or may be he catches a glimpse of them over the rim of the box, as they circle about. Just as they let down their feet to alight, he is expected to spring up and pour his broadside into them. A boat from shore comes and picks up the game, if there is any to pick up.

Eldridge, by common consent, was the first in the box that morning; but only a few ducks were moving, and he had laid there an hour before we marked a solitary bird approaching, and, after circling over the decoys, alighting a little beyond them. The sportsman sprang up as from the bed of the river, and the duck sprang up at the same time, and got away, under fire. After a while Peck went out; but the ducks passed by on the other side, and he had no shots. In the afternoon, remembering the robins, and that robins are game when one's larder is low, I set out alone for the pine bottoms, a mile or more distant. When one is loaded for robins, he may expect to see turkeys, and *vice versâ*. As I was walking carelessly on the borders of an old brambly field that stretched a long distance beside the pine-woods, I heard a noise in front of me, and, on looking in that direction, saw a veritable turkey, with spread tail, leaping along at a rapid rate. She was so completely the image of the barn-yard fowl that I was slow to realize that here was the most notable game of that part of Virginia, for the sight of which sportsmen's eyes do water. As she was fairly on the wing, I sent my robin-shot after her; but they made no impression, and I stood and watched with great interest her long, level flight. As she neared the end of the clearing, she set her wings and sailed straight into the corner of the woods. I found no robins, but went back satisfied with having seen the turkey, and having had an experience that I knew would stir up the envy and the disgust of my companions. They listened with ill-concealed impatience, stamped the ground a few times, uttered a vehement protest against the caprice of fortune that always puts the game in the wrong place or the gun in the wrong hands, and rushed off in quest of that turkey. She was not where they looked, of course; and, on their return about sun-down, when they had ceased to think about their game, she flew out of the top of a pine-tree not thirty rods from camp, and in full view of them, but too far off for a shot.

In my wanderings that afternoon, I came upon two negro shanties in a small triangular clearing in the woods; no road but only a footpath lead to them. Three or four children, the eldest a girl of twelve, were about the door of one of them. I approached and asked for a drink of water. The girl got a glass and showed me to the spring near by.

"We's grandmover's daughter's chilern," she said in reply to my inquiry. Their mother worked in Washington for "eighteen cents a month," and their grandmother took care of them.

Then I thought I would pump her about the natural history of the place.

"What was there in these woods,—what kind of animals,—any?"

"Oh yes, sah, when we first come here to live in dese bottoms, de 'possums and foxes and things were so thick you could hardly go out-o'-doors." A fox had come along one day right where her mother was washing, and they used to catch the chickens "dreadful."

"Were there any snakes?"

"Yes, sah, black snakes, moccasins and doctors."

The doctor, she said, was a powerful ugly customer; it would get right hold of your leg as you were passing along, and whip, and sting you to death. I hoped I should not meet any "doctors."

I asked her if they caught any rabbits.

"Oh yes, we catches dem in 'gums'."

"What are gums?" I asked.

"See dat down dare? Dat's a 'gum'."

I saw a rude box-trap made of rough boards. It seems these traps, and many other things, such as bee-hives, and tubs, etc., are frequently made in the South from a hollow gum-tree; hence the name gum has come to have a wide application.

The ducks flew quite briskly that night; I could hear the whistle of their wings as I stood upon the shore indulging myself in listening. The ear loves a good field as well as the eye, and the night is the best time to listen, to put your ear to nature's key-hole and see what the whisperings and the preparations mean. I overheard some musk-rats engage in a very gentle and affectionate jabber beneath a rude pier of brush and earth, upon which I was standing. The old, old story was evidently being rehearsed under there, but the occasional splashing of the ice-cold water made it seem like very chilling business; still we all know it is not. Our decoys had not been brought in, and I distinctly heard

some ducks splash in among them. The sound of oar-locks in the distance next caught my ears. They were so far away that it took some time to decide whether or not they were approaching. But they finally grew more distinct, the steady, measured beat of an oar in a wooden lock, a very pleasing sound coming over still, moonlit waters. It was an hour before the boat emerged into view and passed my post. A white, misty obscurity began to gather over the waters, and in the morning this had grown to be a dense fog. By early dawn Eldridge was again in the box, and presently his gun went bang! bang! then bang! came again from the second gun he had taken with him, and we imagined the water strewn with ducks. But he reported only one. It floated to him and was picked up, so we need not go out. In the dimness and silence, Peck and I rowed up and down the shore in hopes of starting up a stray duck that might possibly decoy. We saw many objects that simulated ducks pretty well through the obscurity, but they failed to take wing on our approach. The most pleasing thing we saw was a large, rude boat propelled by four colored oarsmen. It looked as if it might have come out of some old picture. Two oarsmen were seated in the bows pulling, and two stood up in the stern, each working a long oar, bending and recovering and uttering a low, wild chant. The spectacle emerged from the fog on the one hand and plunged into it on the other.

Later in the morning, we were attracted by another craft. We heard it coming down upon us long before it emerged into view. It made a sound as of some unwieldy creature slowly pawing the water, and when it became visible through the fog the sight did not belie the ear. We beheld an awkward black hulk that looked as if it might have been made out of the bones of the first steamboat, or was it some Virginia colored man's study of that craft? Its wheels consisted each of two timbers crossing each other at right angles. As the shaft slowly turned, these timbers pawed and pawed the water. It hove to on the flats near our quarters, and a colored man came off in a boat. To our inquiry, he said with a grin that his craft was a "floating saw-mill."

After a while I took my turn in the box, and, with a life-preserver for a pillow, lay there on my back, pressed down between the narrow sides, the muzzle of my gun resting upon my toe and its stock upon my stomach, waiting for the silly ducks to come. I was rather in hopes they would not come, for I felt pretty certain that I could not get up promptly in such narrow quarters and deliver my shot with any precision. As nothing could be seen and as it was very still, it was a good time to listen again. I was virtually under water, and in a good medium for the transmission of sounds. The barking of dogs on the Maryland shore was quite audible, and I heard with great distinctness a Maryland lass call some one to breakfast. They were astir up at Mount Vernon, too, though the fog hid them from view. I heard the mocking or Carolina wren along shore calling quite plainly the words a Georgetown poet has put in his mouth, "Sweet-heart, sweet-heart, sweet!" Presently I heard the whistle of approaching wings, and a solitary duck alighted back of me over my right shoulder —just the most awkward position for me she could have assumed. I raised my head a little and skimmed the water with my eye. The duck was swimming about just beyond the decoys, apparently apprehensive that she was intruding upon the society of her betters. She would approach a little, and then, as the stiff, aristocratic decoys made no sign of welcome or recognition, she would sidle off again. "Who are they, that they should hold themselves so loftily and never condescend to notice a forlorn duck?" I imagined her saying. Should I spring up and show my hand and demand her surrender? It was clearly my duty to do so. I wondered if the boys were looking from shore, for the fog had lifted a little. But I must act, or the duck would be off. I began to turn slowly in my sepulcher and to gather up my benumbed limbs; I then made a rush and got up, and had a fairly good shot as the duck flew across my bows, but I failed to stop her. A man in the woods in the line of my shot cried out, angrily, "Stop shooting this way!"

I laid down again and faced the sun, that had now burnt his way through the fog, till I was nearly blind, but no more ducks decoyed, and I called out to be relieved.

With our one duck, but with many pleasant remembrances, we returned to Washington that afternoon.